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Communion in Community: A Vibrant Lifestyle of a Religious Family

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Abstract

“The root of the human being’s wretchedness is loneliness, it is the absence of love – is the fact that my existence is not embraced by a love that makes it necessary... What man needs is a communion that goes beyond everything and reaches deep into the heart of man” (Benedict XVI 2012). Consecrated Life is a sign of communion in the Church, says *Vita Consecrata*. God’s presence extends through history in a very real way through the communion of Consecrated Religious, and they are called to become channels of grace to the world. A very good proof of love is that you strive in household duties to relieve others of work, and also rejoice and praise the Lord very much when you see an increase in their communion through virtues, says St. Teresa of Avila. When the members of a community know well how to integrate prayer and humility, it leads not only to true communion but promotes a lifestyle that is truly vibrant, touched by the love of God and love of their neighbor. When the Superior uses such “soft skills” which will enhance genuine communion in the community, she will create an atmosphere of trust, a sense of belongingness and team spirit among the community members.

Introduction

Community life is one of the marks of a religious Institute (Can. 607), is proper to each religious family. It should gather together and should offer an example of reconciliation to Christ and of the communion that is rooted and founded in His love (Can. 602).

“Communication is at the heart of what the Church is all about”, said Avery Dulles, as he addressed a large crowd at New Orleans in 1971. He underscored and asserted that the Church exists to bring us into communion with God and thereby, to open channels of communication with one another. The present day world is largely shaped by technological communication media and most of our decisions are prompted by keeping in touch with new developments and the current situation. A decision that is based on insufficient communication is a bad decision. Jesus Christ himself communicated through dramatic/vibrant action. His Gospel was communicated by His whole way of life.

While it is true that by its very essence the Church is a mystery of communion, people made one with the communion of the Father and the Son, and with the Holy Spirit. St. John Paul II said that Consecrated Religious are called to “reflect the depth and richness of this mystery, taking shape as a human community in which the Trinity dwells...” (VC #41). Hence God’s Presence is communicated through history in a real way through the communion of Consecrated Religious communities, for they are called to become channels of grace to the world.

Communion in Community

Having established a strong platform of God’s Trinitarian nature, Communion in Community can be considered as one of the essential elements of “Community Lifestyle.” Being rooted in this foundation I wish to illustrate in the following article how “Communion in Community” is the vibrant Lifestyle of a Religious Family. For religion, communion in Christ is expressed in a stable and visible way through a vibrant community life. The foundation of unity in the community is “the communion in Christ established by the founding gift, and this communion is rooted in religious consecration itself.” (EE. #18)

“Community is the first and most believable gospel that we can preach ... we are asked to humanize our community life ... to wear God’s smile, to build friendship, family life ... to make it not a purgatory but a family.” (Pope Francis – Audience 2014)

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.” (Col. 3:12). This is the model par excellence, for Communion in Community.

“Wherever consecrated people are...there is always joy” said Pope Francis (2013) in His Letter “Rejoice” for the Year of Consecrated Life. Indeed, anyone who has met the Lord and follows Him faithfully is a communicator of the joy of the Spirit. In order to transmit this joy

in community, every member will have to make deliberate efforts to radiate joy in and through her/his life and perseveringly sustain it despite the challenges and failures. This capacity for sustainability can be acquired only when the members begin to live community life with a sense of wonder and gratitude for the innumerable blessings that they receive from the Lord daily and commune with one another through active sharing.

Pope Francis reiterates the importance of witnessing to a vibrant lifestyle of 'fraternal communion' in His Apostolic Exhortation - '*Evangelii Gaudium*', as He awakens every Christian heart in communities throughout the world to "offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another and how you encourage and accompany one another" (No.99).

Eucharist: The Source of Community

One of the effective ways of living this witnessing life of communion is by meditating on the Word of God in prayer, making the celebration of the Eucharist the source and center of community life and allowing it to influence our relationships in community and activities in the larger mission community. This will also enable its members to humanize the community they live in. Such a practice will automatically prompt the members to wear God's smile, go forward and build friendships which will create communities that are vibrant and resonating joyful zeal to revitalize the activities of their mission. The Eucharistic Christ is the source of every community, as unconditional mutual love demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without judging them and an ability to forgive up to "seventy times seven" (Mt. 18:22; VC# 42) is the core and essence of communion in community. Such communion led Jesus Christ to the gift of Himself even to the supreme sacrifice of the cross.

The dynamics of forming a community makes us realize that none of us were called in isolation, but the Lord wanted us to meet others who were also called just like us to live with, communicate, to work out our hopes side by side, face our little battles in and out, and reach our goal especially through the Charism bequeathed to us by our saintly founders and foundresses, unmindful of the little group and despite the frailty of union at the initial stages. Today we are invited to meet the challenges, be in touch with the society and become a living part of it - especially being in communion with the poor and the marginalized. Living as a 'community of communion' we are called to stand by each other, forget the differences, bearing and suffering together - everything building up a feeling of family, sharing and caring.

Personal Sharing and Enrichment vs Weak Ego Strength

A common strength, as well as a problem in our communities in India, is the great variety of languages, the ethnic origin, and the social and economic background of the members. Such a situation at times is considered as an enrichment and a challenge by living together in peace and harmony and in spite of the differences. We are very much enriched by the variety, and we are called on to be the witnesses of Peace and harmony in the church and in the society where we live. St. Paul's timely advice to people of Ephesus (4:32): "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ Jesus had forgiven you," though poignant, does not seem to be the ideal advice to every individual in a community scenario. We know in practice while living in the community even some of our friends have no sufficient ego strength. Very good resolutions after a "good "Retreat" or "Prayer Day", fizzle out - as interpersonal Conflicts that surface and in such interactions the life of prayer of those in conflict lie on a lower ebb.

When a young person enters religious institute, he/she generally views the great importance of blossoming and growing in a very personal relationship with God. And then after very intense reflection, prayer and discernment, the person responds positively to this beautiful reality. The individual, with the personal consecration of every member to God, includes communion with the other members of the institute. Whereas in the case of a young woman / and a man - they are marrying that other individual person - into a natural family and they are to learn to live in the context of a family tradition of some sort, knowing that marriage and raising a family are the essential elements of an on-going nature of life in a society.

Freedom and Integration at Formation

In order to persevere with a healthy communion in the community, it is imperative that during the Initial as well as at the On-going Formation level the understanding of human life, its intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics be observed of the Formees and helped to integrate them by evaluating and facilitating a holistic and mature growth. In their formation, young religious "should not only be warned of the dangers confronting Chastity but trained to make celibate life consecrated to God a part of the richness of their personality" (PC 12). This in particular with regard to life in the community is handled as an important component of religious commitment.

Communion in Community should be closely linked with sharing of their Apostolic Life and experiences in the given mission. A subtle need

for self-enhancing, working for one's glory and name can unconsciously creep in and prevent the members from relating their successes and failures in the mission as constructive challenges. When the community is open and ready for regular contact, sharing and dialogue, the individual members will not only respect their own vocation but also will uphold the need for community building and for recognition of each one's vocation and respect for one another in an atmosphere of freedom. This implies a high degree of maturity and communion in the community as a golden opportunity to grow side by side and presenting the unique vocation of self-fulfillment through a genuine experience of persevering in as consecrated men and women in the modern society. This would further reinforce the important role of consecrated religious in the Church and help to renew its image which is fast dying out as it has happened in the West.

Communion in Community can be enlivened when the members become sensitive to the needs of one another and go beyond their human limitations. An internalization of the Word of God and taking Jesus' interactions with his first community of Disciples/apostles as a role model, would greatly equip the community members to live in effective communion. Our Holy Father Pope Francis reminds us in E.G. 141: "I believe that the secret lies in the way Jesus looked at people, seeing beyond their weaknesses and failings...." This task of strengthening the Formees at their formation level requires that they make the compassionate behavior of Jesus their pattern of life by strengthening their love for the Word of God and their intimacy with the person of Jesus. This in effect will help them to be joyful and trust in moments of challenging situations, sickness and accept these with serenity and in deep communion with God.

People today not only need words but most of all they need the religious in communities to bear witness to the mercy and tenderness of the Lord which warms the heart in genuine communion, rekindles hope and attracts people to see the religious as effective instruments who bring consolation to others.

Mission and Communion in Community

Such a witnessing will be effected if only the members of the communities who are placed in an environment where they make a determined effort to learn the local language and local culture. This will have such a boomerang effect on the people that they, in turn, will commune with the community members as one of their own. The interaction that the members have at the interpersonal level will perfect them by learning

the art of communicating and collaborating with the members of the community and our co-workers in our mission/apostolate.

Responding to the call of the New Evangelization, consecrated religious that live in community life, vibrantly radiate to the world the presence of Jesus, whose mercy and love penetrate the wretchedness of loneliness. "Communion, in fact, becomes a sign for the entire world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ... In this way, communion leads to mission and itself becomes. In fact, it is a communion that is a missionary." (VC #46) It is the work of each community member to make communion in God to be a channel of grace that dispels the absence of love in the hearts of men and women and embrace them in love that makes their lifestyle in Community a truly fulfilling experience.

The Role of the Superior: A Dynamic Community Life-Style

"How wonderful it is, how pleasant for God's people to live together in harmony!" Ps.133:1. The Superior shall facilitate communion and a healthy climate in the community. In the actual running of our institutions, mostly educational and that of other social work, the workload on many is too heavy. Certain sisters have to do a full-time job and attend to their spiritual life and other duties in the community. This very often leads to a dichotomy between work and spiritual duties. Under such challenges, the sisters cannot become integrated personalities. We need a lot of spiritual guidance to strike a healthy balance between work and spiritual life. All growth can take place in mutual exchange and enrichment through communication. We need a regular confrontation with ourselves in communion with others. If we remain alone, spiritual life frequently can stagnate and lose its dynamism leaving the community lifestyle move in repetitious circles of our inner world. In our present day world, we need much sharing in genuine dialogue which comprises both listening and speaking.

According to some research done by A. K. Grodin, it indicated that "for both men and women, 'community' appears to be the primary reason for seeking religious life." Of course, we have plenty of opportunities for ministry within and outside the community, especially in this day and age. Humanly stated, even though our attraction to religious life initially and at the conscious level- is "to love God and our neighbor", it is true at the same time that every individual is searching for a supportive, life-giving, intimate and faith-filled community life. We live in an age that glorifies personal preference. "Have it your way" seems to be the watchword of our present times. The tyranny of personal

preference seems to govern our lives at times. In fact, it is towards mid-life quite a few priests and women religious lose sight of their primary goal in opting to follow Christ in and through a Community/ Congregation and become quite a despondent wish to discontinue their commitment. Sometimes it is mainly due to a growing need for closer communion and intimacy by sharing of life at a deeper level: namely to find self- fulfillment in marriage and eventually work towards limiting their Communion with a selective and limited natural family. Quite often it is observed that such persons tend to isolate themselves from the larger community by being distracted and self-centered, leading to being ineffective in their mission. Some others may carry on a secret clandestine relationship with the opposite gender which invariably ends in giving a lame excuse and showing a lack of interest in their commitment.

Living a healthy and happy communion in Community is not always easy. Being human, we tend to ignore some of our hidden needs. There are several needs that are basic to community living. 1) a sense of achieving; 2) to build a good relationship with every member of the community; 3) to find satisfaction that comes from recognition, appreciation, and belonging. These can be especially worked through if the superior and the members cooperate to satisfy these needs in a healthy and loving way. When these needs are not met reasonably, there creeps in certain dissatisfaction, rejection, and unhappiness in the community. A genuine experience of 'community' is vital especially for young religious who come from closely knit and nuclear families. A peculiar challenge in our A.C. Communities is the great variety of languages, of ethnic origin, social and economic background of the members. Considering all these situations, the challenge is to live together in peace and harmony, in spite of differences. It is imperative that 'religious community life' must try more and more to let go the de-personalizing impact of institutional life, by recognizing the members' personal qualities rather than by their functions.

Prayer alone will not be the solution to build a lifestyle of close-knit family spirit. The superior needs to have genuine concern and express appreciation on a daily basis and be a catalyst to help form a good community, especially at the affective level. She, in the words of St. Paul, should be able to say, "follow my example as I follow Christ's" (1 Cor. 11:1) and will try her best to live what she preaches. She will be uncompromisingly honest and will not panic but support and encourage everyone. In a community we are called to "show real humility to each other" says St. Peter (1 Peter 5:5). This requires her/

him to be more and more humble, if not, 'pride' is sure to take a tumble. So we are encouraged to copy God, just as children tend to copy their fathers and mothers. It means adopting a lifestyle of communion in love – based on Christ's offering of himself in love to God. The entire *modus operandi*/lifestyle of Christ's way of living and loving was "to lay down his life for his friends", i.e. the highest form of love. This entails a constant letting go of egoism and self-transcendence in the service of the "other" and as a means of excellent communion in action.

"Soft-skills" for Building Communion in Community

The following are a few "Soft Skills" which the Superior and the Members need to practice to change their lifestyle to that of building a loving community:

- Treat every member with respect whether big or small. Do not take anyone for granted
- Appreciate - what members and the group do, unmindful of the magnitude of the work
- Go to the members to consult them rather than call them to you
- Never scold or correct anyone in public as it can do only harm
- Never gossip or speak ill of others because partiality and groupism by nature, leave their negative impact on the religious community
- Express your self-doubts, at least to prudent people
- Remember Birthdays and Feast days of the members of your community
- Never be partial and treat everyone – young and old with due respect
- Listen empathetically especially those who are emotionally fragile
- Have the spirit of understanding towards everyone and show it in a positive way
- Avoid 'selective listening' and be fully present to the person when you listen
- Be aware of your body language and facial expression which speak louder than words
- "Speak the truth in love" (Eph.4:15) but this requires much prayer, prudence, and silence before you speak
- Be open to "feedback" and do not react negatively to suggestions and constructive criticism

- Be a person of integrity and credibility and be free from any hidden agendas
- Exude joy and peace as your lifestyle, which is helpful for community building and communion in community
- Avoid developing dichotomies and double messages at all cost

Conclusion

Division and fragmentation of all kind are the reality in which we live today. There are divisions on the basis of religion, caste, community and race. Strong in the personal experience of communion, we as individuals and communities are called upon by the Church to extend, strengthen and re-create communion. We are to become experts in fraternal communion, the leaven of unity and paragons of compassionate love. If our communities become “schools of love” (*Scuola Amoris*) and a clear visible sign of cordiality to all, we will be witnessing to the Trinitarian communion in all our interpersonal relationships.

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